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RUEHNE/AMEMBASSY NEW DELHI PRIORITY 1868
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RUEHKO/AMEMBASSY TOKYO PRIORITY 3374
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RUEHGV/USMISSION GENEVA PRIORITY 2634
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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 COLOMBO 000211

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DEPARTMENT FOR SCA/INS

E.O. 12958: DECL: 02/27/2018

TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [PHUM](#) [MOPS](#) [CE](#)

SUBJECT: SRI LANKA: RARE MEETING BETWEEN PRESIDENT AND
OPPOSITION LEADER PRODUCES LITTLE

REF: A. COLOMBO 55

[1](#)B. 62

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Classified By: CLASSIFIED BY AMBASSADOR ROBERT O. BLAKE, JR. REASONS: 1
.4(b,d).

[1](#)1. (C) SUMMARY: President Rajapaksa and Opposition Leader Ranil Wickremesinghe had their first meeting in months, but Wickremesinghe called the meeting inconclusive. He rebuffed the President's attempt to encourage the UNP to rejoin the APRC discussions. However, Wickremesinghe said that the UNP would contest provincial council elections in the East that may be held later this year if the security situation and political climate improve. Regarding the implementation of the 17th amendment, the President candidly told Wickremesinghe that he would not appoint the Constitutional Council because it would usurp the powers of the president. Vitharana acknowledged that the government was engaged in "delaying tactics" on the final APRC document. Vitharana also said that for the time being, APRC deliberations would go forward without the TMVP. End Summary.

OPPOSITION LEADER REPORTS LITTLE PROGRESS

[1](#)2. (C) On February 27, Ambassador had separate conversations with Opposition Leader Ranil Wickremesinghe and Professor Tissa Vitharana (SLFP), both of whom participated in President Rajapaksa's meeting with Ranil on the evening of February 26. Ambassador told Wickremesinghe that we welcomed the first meeting in a long time between the President and the opposition leader. Ranil responded that while it was positive that the two were talking again, the meeting itself was inconclusive. He said they spoke mostly about the APRC, the Constitutional Council, and elections in the east.

[1](#)3. (C) Wickremesinghe reported that the President had urged

the UNP to rejoin the APRC discussions. Ranil responded that the UNP had merely suspended its participation and was waiting for the APRC to come forward with its final report, which the UNP would evaluate before deciding whether to endorse it. Ranil said the President emphasized the need for all parties to participate in the APRC, remarking that he did not want to be "pushed around by the international community."

14. (C) According to the Opposition Leader, the President also suggested that the UNP participate in the local council elections planned for March 10th in eastern Sri Lanka. (Note: the deadline for candidates to register passed weeks ago.) Ranil told the President the UNP had decided not to participate because the ground situation would not permit free and fair elections. He said he did tell the President, however, that the UNP would contest provincial council elections proposed for later this year if the security and political situation improves.

15. (C) Wickremesinghe told Ambassador that he pushed the President to implement the 17th Amendment so that the Constitutional Council could function and appoint independent members of the Human Rights, Police and other commissions. Ranil said the President candidly responded that he would not appoint the Council because it would usurp the powers of the president. He also expressed concern about some of the appointments that already had been made to the Council. Ranil commented to the Ambassador that it is clear the President will continue to obstruct the appointment of the Council so his appointees can control these commissions.

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GSL DELAYING APRC

16. (C) Ambassador asked APRC chairperson Vitharana if he thought there had been any progress on the APRC as a result of the President's meeting with the opposition leader. Vitharana also noted that the UNP was waiting for the APRC to produce a document that it could evaluate. Vitharana told the President and Ranil that 90% of the document was complete. Ranil asked to see the document, which the President and Vitharana undertook to send him. Ambassador noted he had heard from several sources the President has no intention of allowing the APRC to complete its work; what was Vitharana's view? Vitharana responded candidly that he did not know. He said he planned to work with the APRC to finalize a document, but he acknowledged that the government was engaged in "delaying tactics."

17. (C) The Ambassador asked about reports that the Sinhalese chauvinist JHU had proposed to include the TMVP in APRC deliberations. Vitharana said that most APRC members had opposed the JHU request on the grounds that the TMVP should be treated in the same way as the LTTE. The President's election manifesto, the Mahinda Chintanaya, had provisions for talks with the LTTE provided they lay down their arms and come into the democratic mainstream. APRC members felt the TMVP should conform with these same requirements. Vitharana said he had discussed the matter in an earlier meeting with the President on February 26th. They agreed that once local council elections are held in the east, and assuming the TMVP wins seats, the APRC will have a further discussion about TMVP participation in the APRC and make a recommendation to the President. Meanwhile APRC deliberations would go forward without the TMVP. (Note: according to media reports, the JHU, the MEP, and the President's SLFP have now decided to suspend working within the APRC because the committee would not accommodate the TMVP at this point.)

18. (C) COMMENT: The first meeting in a long while between the President and the opposition leader does not appear to have led to any change in the political status quo. The UNP maintains its refusal to rejoin the APRC discussions, at

least until the APRC releases its final report, which the UNP would evaluate before deciding whether to endorse it. The UNP also declined to participate in local elections in the east. If Wickremesinghe's account of the conversation is accurate, it raises some disturbing questions about the President's intentions on both the APRC and the Constitutional Council. A refusal to appoint the Constitutional Council, on whatever the grounds, will set up another bruising confrontation and could even lead to a move to impeach the President. This will only exacerbate an already inflamed relationship between the two major Sinhalese parties and make cooperation on matters of critical national interest, such as resolving the conflict, even more difficult.

BLAKE